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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the decision of the Russian Department at the University of California at Riverside to make the development of reading comprehension the primary goal in beginning Russian courses. The changing international situation and the lack of opportunity to use the oral skills acquired in previous audiolingual Russian language programs are seen to be the major reasons for the change in priority of educational objectives. (RL)

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Reading Comprehension First in Beginning Russian

Why and One How

In this paper, I propose to discuss why the Russian Department, of which I am a member, at the University of California at Riverside (UCR) has come to the conclusion that the development of reading comprehension skill should be stressed as the primary goal in the beginning Russian courses at our institution. In addition to justifying a somewhat fundamental shift in pedagogical orientation, from a teaching methodology primarily based on the implementation of oral/aural techniques to one initially stressing how to learn to read Russian as quickly and painlessly as possible, I also hope to give you some information on how we are carrying out this program.

The decision to substitute one type of methodology for another was influenced by two major factors:

a. a reevaluation of our own resources which, because of general enrollment declines and funding problems within the entire University, have made it increasingly difficult to justify the small-size class and extensive support faculty necessary to mount effective oral/aural instruction, and

b. considerable student input indicating a general frustration with the goals of oral/aural instruction and with the pedagogical techniques used to achieve these goals.

Perhaps the problem of student dissatisfaction needs some clarification. It can be explained in part, at least for UCR students, by taking a look at our local situation. UCR is located in an area without a Russian-speaking community, and the campus itself has no Russian dorms. As a result there is little opportunity for the students to speak Russian or to listen to it being spoken

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outside of the classroom or the language lab. Furthermore, despite an increase in the availability of student travel opportunities to the USSR, only very few of our students have taken advantage of them, e.g., in 1972, only three out of forty-five visited the Soviet Union, either as individuals or as part of a summer language program. Financial considerations seem to be the major inhibiting factor, since almost all students have expressed the desire to go, if they could afford it. The prospects for any lessening of costs in the near future seem remote; on the contrary, with the curtailment of youth fares and the continuing devaluation of the dollar, costs should continue to increase. Thus, with travel to the Soviet Union beyond the realm of possibility for all but a small number of students and with little opportunity to actively use what Russian they have learned at UCR, there is little stimulus or enthusiasm on their part for developing skills in oral communication, which seem to have little immediate value. In some ways the students' situation is analogous to that of someone learning to type but never having a typewriter on which to practice, except in the typing class.

In response to these factors, our department decided to review the general rationale for learning a FL, and after devising a set of realistic options for students studying Russian at UCR, to revise the introductory and intermediate courses. As part of this process of review, I developed the following "why's" for FL study which also specifically apply to the study of Russian.

1. Utilitarian Need

One must know the language of the country in which one lives. In the United States everyone must be able to speak English, and if one lives in a large city or anywhere in the Southwest or California, a knowledge of Spanish is often helpful.

2. Tourism and Exchange of Experiences on a Personal Level

Skills in speaking and listening comprehension are most important.

3. Professional and Career Goals

As complete a mastery of a FL as is possible is essential for those who plan to become translators, interpreters, teachers, etc.

4. The Broadening of One's Understanding of Another Culture

Here the cultural enrichment component of the program is more important than the study of the FL itself.

5. The Intellectual Challenge of Learning a FL

Exposure to a systematic organization of a body of knowledge totally unknown to the student. The fun of doing something difficult and challenging.

6. Literary, Philosophical, Philological Goals

To be able to read the "classics" in the original or to understand how a particular language is structured or how several languages relate one to another.

7. Exchange of Both General and Specialized Information

This type of exchange is usually not oral and most frequently involves reading newspapers, journals, documents, etc., which are written in an expository prose style using a contemporary vocabulary.

In correlating these reasons with what we felt were the need of the students who specifically want to study Russian, we began by immediately discounting the first reason and deciding to deemphasize the second one. Utilitarian need is not applicable, at least in the United States, and the desire to be able to communicate effectively in order to exchange personal experiences has a low priority for our campus, since the possibilities the UCR student has to travel to the USSR and for local contacts with Russian speakers are quite limited. We conclude that if students are especially interested in developing oral/aural skills, we would refer them to one of the several excellent summer language institutes which are designed to help them to develop this competence.

The five remaining reasons cited, however, all seem to be quite appropriate

for us. The third and fourth ones require a kind of specialization already available at UCR. A three-course sequence on Russian civilization has been well received by those students whose primary interest lies in wanting to know about the culture of Russia and the Soviet Union and whose interest in the language per se is tangential. The undergraduate major provides the in-depth knowledge necessary for students preparing for careers in secondary teaching, librarianship, government service, or for those going on to graduate school. Reasons 5, 6, and 7--the challenge of learning a FL, some knowledge of a FL to supplement linguistic or literary studies, and the desire to be able to retrieve information written in a FL--are those most frequently cited by the majority of our students for wanting to study Russian in particular. As a result of this student opinion and the reexamination of the possibilities for using spoken Russian by beginning and intermediate students at UCR, we, therefore, decided to revamp the introductory Russian course and to begin by developing reading skills first. This does not mean that we simply reinstituted a "scientific" or the typical graduate FL reading course. On the contrary, we are making a conscientious effort to develop an exciting, challenging program which will enable students not only to learn to read contemporary Russian, but also to gain a sense of accomplishment about what they have achieved after one or two quarters of study.

At present, the beginning Russian language sequence at UCR covers three quarters. Classes meet five hours a week, and by the end of the second quarter, the students are able to read, however haltingly, a newspaper. There has been a noticeable increase in the morale of the students as they realize that the newspaper headlines often are quite understandable, and not infrequently, one can find a beginner pursuing the Russian newspapers and magazines in the library. Motivation to continue with Russian has been reflected in a decline in the attrition rate, particularly between first and second quarters. In the

third quarter of beginning Russian and the first two quarters of the intermediate sequence, increasing emphasis is placed on actively mastering grammar with a considerable amount of the student's time allocated to written homework involving translation and composition. This is accompanied by a marked increase in the amount of spoken Russian used by the teacher and required of the student. At the same time the students continue to expand their skill in reading comprehension, working on texts of increasing complexity and sophistication. Only in the last quarter of the intermediate sequence is any real effort made to introduce 19th-century prose or poetry.

In attempting to devise a program which stresses early acquisition of reading skills, a fundamental decision had to be made in regard to the determination of vocabulary and texts. Since the students in the beginning course represent a variety of disciplines and interests, highly technical material only appeals to a small given number of them at any time. Therefore, we decided to keep the subject matter as broad and interesting as possible and build a vocabulary in which every word learned would be valuable to all of the students. Specialization can follow general proficiency.

To this end, we have developed a high-frequency vocabulary list of contemporary Russian which contains approximately 4200 lexical items of which 700 or 18.5% are recognizable foreign borrowings. This list, which is intended for use both in beginning and intermediate courses, is an amalgamation of material taken from the following four sources:

a. The 3300 minimum word list compiled for foreign students who are coming to study at Moscow State University. It was published in 1962 and is available through the Russian Packet, distributed by the Friends School, Baltimore, Maryland.

b. Russian Word Count compiled by E. A. Steinfeldt (1959-62). This 2500 word list with commentary is published by the Pedagogical Research

Institute of the USSR.

c. "Basic Russian Word List" consists of 720 items compiled by R. E. Smith of the Department of Slavic Languages, Ohio State University (1971).

d. A Frequency Dictionary of Newspaper Language, edited by G. Polyakova and G. Solganik (Moscow State University, 1971). This list contains 1997 items but is, unfortunately, out of print. However, it is an especially valuable list because it contains ten sublists giving the frequency of lexical items for the following areas:

Official Communiques	Agriculture
Foreign Affairs	Economics
Ideology	Sport
Morality and Ethics	Science
Industry	Culture

At present, the vocabulary we have compiled is being used as a supplement to the regular textbook. However, we are now working on our own grammar and collection of readings and will begin testing them in the Fall of 1973. The initial set of readings will contain a very large number of foreign borrowings so that the student will not have to contend with both a vocabulary, totally foreign to him, and new and complex grammatical structures. The readings imitate Soviet journalstic prose but are also somewhat neutral in style. As far as content is concerned, they will generally relate to the quality of life in the Soviet Union. Such topics as pollution, urbanization, sports, the state of the arts, and problems of the young will be treated. We have tried using such material experimentally this year by preparing a set of supplementary readings which we use in conjunction with the present textbook. The students seem to enjoy the supplementary readings, and although they are challenging, the readings are not so overwhelmingly difficult as to destroy the student's confidence in his own ability. We felt that before students are exposed at

any length to 19th-century Russian literature, they should be able to handle contemporary Russian--just as it makes more sense for a Russian studying English to begin with some kind of meterial reflecting current usage, rather than Charles Dickens or James Fenimore Cooper.

Shifting away from an oral/aural to a reading orientation in the introductory sequence, however, has not resulted in the complete exclusion of the former approach. Concurrently offered with the regular beginning Russian course is a rather low-keyed conversation course, involving memorization of dialogues which then serve as a basis for free conversation. This course requires regular study in the language lab and meets for two hours a week. The dialogues used are short and also contain a high-frequency vocabulary. The conversation course has been a successful adjunct to the lower division program and has satisfied those students who want some experience with the spoken language.

We feel that rather than doing a mediocre to adequate job in the preparation of lower division language students, as has often been the case in the past, it is better to prepare beginning students to excel in at least one of the four areas of language skills. At UCR, we seem best equipped to make that push in the area of reading comprehension.

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